

## The spread of Mandarin in a Malaysian Hakka community: Focus on religious domain<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This paper investigates the spread of Mandarin in a Hakka community in Balik Pulau, Penang, focusing on religious domain. Data on language usage in Catholic families and at church were collected through interviews and observations. In total, ten Catholic Hakka families (one parent and one child from each family) were interviewed at their homes. Four senior church members and the priest from the Church of the Holy Name of Jesus, Balik Pulau were also interviewed with regard to language practices in the church in the past and at present. The data indicates that the Hakka dialect is undergoing decline in these Catholic families as well as in the church. Mandarin is spreading its usage in religious domain in this Catholic community. The change of language use in religious domain is echoing the spread of Mandarin in the Chinese community in Malaysia, which may also be an impact of China on the Chinese overseas.

**Keywords:** language spread, Mandarin, Hakka, Malaysia, religion, Balik Pulau

### Introduction

The spread of Mandarin in Malaysia has been reported in the family domain and public settings in Johor and Kuala Lumpur (Wang 2012). The findings show that the process of Mandarin spread is different from that of English spread, which is bi-directional including both top-down spread and bottom spread. The survey on language use by Chinese students in Kuala Lumpur also indicates that Mandarin is replacing Chinese dialects in the family domain and intergenerational language shift has taken place within three-generation families (Chong and Wang 2009). Similar trend of language shift in the Chinese community is found in Sarawak as well (Ting and Sussex 2002). However, there are scarce studies on language usage in the religious domain among Malaysian Chinese community. Ong (2006) investigated the Catholic community in Balik Pulau and highlighted the extensive usage of the Hakka dialect in religious activities. As language was not the focus of Ong's study, no detailed data was available in relation to language choice at church. The current study aims to examine how the Hakka

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dialect and Mandarin are utilized in a Hakka Catholic community in Balik Pulau, Penang and whether Mandarin has spread its usage in the religious domain.

## Method

### Interview

There are two groups of interviewees. The first group is comprised of senior church members and the priest while the second group is from two-generation Catholic families. The fieldwork was carried out in November 2012 and March 2015. In total, four senior church members and ten Catholic families were interviewed. Their basic information is shown in Table 1. The interview with the senior church members is focused on the history of the church and the evolution of language use in the church. The interview with the Catholic families is on language choice for religious activities at home and church and their attitudes towards the Hakka dialect and Mandarin. All interviews have been recorded and transcribed.

Table 1: Demographic information of the Catholic Hakka families under study

Family ID	Father's origin	Mother's origin	Parent interviewed (age)	Child interviewed (age)
1	Hokkien	Huizhou Hakka	Mother (33)	Son (12)
2	Meixian Hakka	Meixian Hakka	Father (45)	Son (15)
3	Huizhou Hakka	Huizhou Hakka	Mother (45)	Son (17)
4	Hokkien	Huizhou Hakka	Mother (45)	Daughter (19)
5	Hepo Hakka	Lufeng Hakka	Mother (39)	Son (11)
6	Huizhou Hakka	Hokkien	Mother (43)	Son (15)
7	Hepo Hakka	Hakka	Grandmother *(67)	Grandson (15)
8	Hepo Hakka	Meixian Hakka	Mother (35)	Son (13)
9	Huizhou Hakka	Huizhou Hakka	Mother (51)	Daughter (19)
10	Huizhou Hakka	Huizhou Hakka	Father (45)	Daughter (19)

(\*The grandparents take care of their grandchildren as the parents are working in a different state.)

### Participant observation

The author participated various church activities during the fieldwork in 2012 and 2015. These religious activities include the Saturday and Sunday mass, prayer before the mass, the Palm Sunday mass and the Prayers of Way of the Cross. Field notes were taken during these activities and special attention was given to language choice.

In addition to the above methods, we also make use of the documents at the church such as the survey on Catholic families which was conducted in 2008 by the church, the memorial book on the 150 anniversary of the church, and registration of marriage and death since 1854. These materials provide important reference on the background of the church.

## Results



### The spread of Mandarin as a mother tongue

An Intergenerational shift of mother tongue is found among the Hakka families. Table 2 shows the mother tongue and the competency in the Hakka dialect by two generations.

Table 2: Mother tongue and competency in the Hakka dialect by Hakka parents and children

Family ID	Mother tongue		Competency in the Hakka dialect	
	Parent	children	Parent	children
1	Hakka	Mandarin	Yes	No
2	Hakka	Mandarin	Yes	Yes but limited
3	Hakka	Hakka	Yes	Yes
4	Hakka	Hokkien	Yes	Yes
5	Mandarin	Mandarin	Yes	Understand only
6	Hokkien	Hakka	Limited	Yes
7	Hakka	Mandarin	Yes	No, very limited
8	Hokkien	Mandarin	Yes	No , very limited
9	Hakka	Mandarin	Yes	No, very limited
10	Hakka	Mandarin	Yes	Yes but at an ordinary level

For the parent generation, the majority of interviewees speak Hakka as their mother tongue. The exceptions are Family 5, 6, and 8. The mother from Family 5 is originally from Malacca where Mandarin is the dominant language. Therefore, her mother tongue is Mandarin. The mother from Family 6 is Hokkien. So she speaks Hokkien as her mother tongue. The mother from Family 8 is Hakka. However, her mother is of Hokkien origin. So she claims that Hokkien is her mother tongue. Without these exceptional cases, the choice of mother tongue for parents is absolutely Hakka. In contrast, there is a sharp shift of mother tongue among the child generation. Seven of them speak Mandarin as their mother tongue and only two children speak Hakka as their mother tongue. This indicates that Mandarin has spread as a mother tongue. Although the child generation have shifted to Mandarin, some of them can still speak Hakka. However, there is also an intergenerational difference in the competency of the Hakka dialect. Almost all parents claim that they know how to speak Hakka while only three children make such claim. The rest children either have no competency in the dialect or have limited competency. In contrast, all the children speak Mandarin fluently.

### The spread of Mandarin in the home domain

The language for family communication has changed from Hakka to Mandarin. Table 3 shows the language use patterns among family members. It can be seen that there is a gradual shift of language usage within three generations. Between the grandparent and parent generations, Hakka is the predominant language; between parents, both Hakka and Mandarin are used equally; between parents and children, Mandarin is spoken in all families and Hakka is used additionally in some families; between children, Mandarin is used almost exclusively. The intergenerational change of language use is summarized in Figure 1. On the one hand,



Mandarin is spreading its usage from the parent generation towards the child generation. On the other hand, the Hakka dialect is shrinking its usage among the child generation in comparison with the parent generation.

Table 3: Language use among family members

Family ID	Between grandparents and parents	Between parents	Between parents and children	Between children
1	Hakka	Cantonese	Mandarin/English	/
2	Hakka	Mandarin	Mandarin/some Hakka	Mandarin
3	Hakka	Hakka	Hakka/Mandarin	Hakka
4	Hakka/Hokkien	Hokkien	Hokkien/Hakka/Mandarin	Mandarin/Hokkien
5	Hakka	Mandarin	Mandarin	Mandarin
6	Hokkien/Hakka	Mandarin	Mandarin	Mandarin
7	Hakka	Hakka	Mandarin	Mandarin
8	Hokkien	Mandarin	Mandarin	Mandarin
9	Hakka/Hokkien	Hakka	Mandarin	Mandarin
10	Hakka	Hakka	Mandarin/Hakka	Mandarin

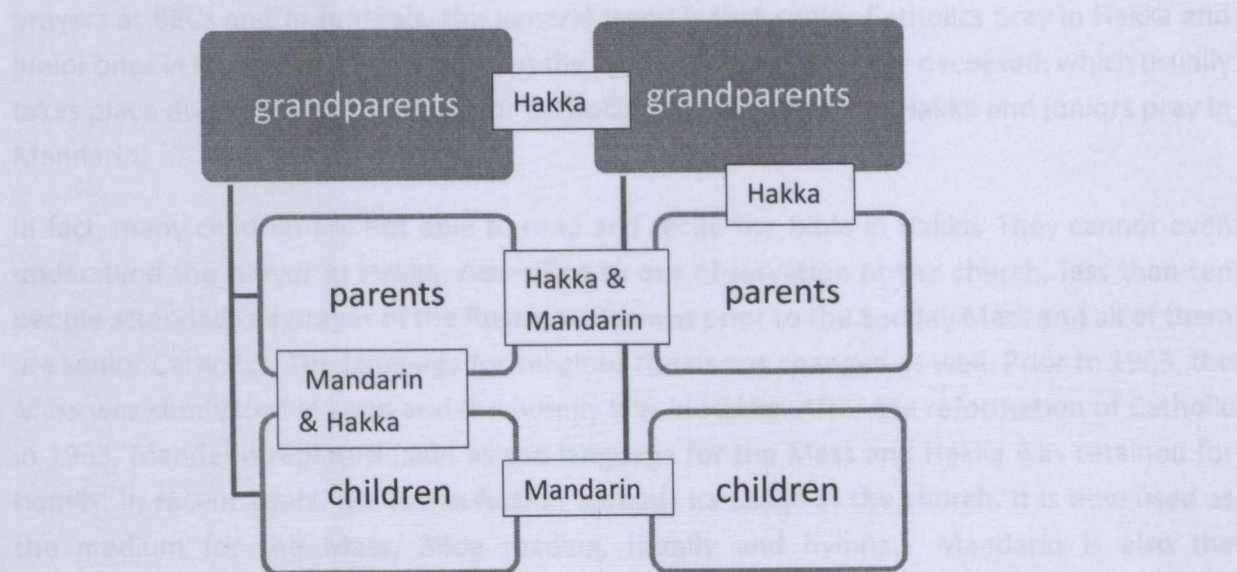


Figure 1: Intergenerational change of language usage in the home domain

#### The spread of Mandarin in religious domain

During the interview, both parents and children are asked about their language usage for religious activities which include personal prayer, family prayer and group prayer. Group prayer refers to the prayer at funeral and the prayer organized by the Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs) which was founded in 2000. There are eight BECs in Balik Pulau and each community is comprised of five to twenty families (Church of the Holy Name of Jesus 2003). All families from the same community take part in a monthly prayer in one of the families. Table 4 shows the language choice for prayers by two generations.



Table 4: Language usage for religious activities

Family ID	Personal prayer		Family prayer		Group prayer	
	parent	child	Parent	child	Parent	child
1	M	M	H/M	M	H	M
2	M	M	M/H	M	M/H	M/H
3	H/M	H	H/M	H	M/H	M/H
4	M	M	H	M	M/H	M/H
5	M	M	M	M	M/H	M/H
6	M	M	H	M	H	H & M
7	H	M	M	M	H & M	M
8	H	M	M	M	H	M
9	H	M	/	/	H & M	M
10	H & M	M	H & M	M	H & M	H & M

(H=Hakka, M=Mandarin)

In general, an intergenerational difference is found between parents and children in terms of their language choice for personal prayer. Parents tend to use either Hakka or Mandarin to conduct personal prayer while most children's language for personal prayer is Mandarin. The situation for family prayer shows a similar trend. However, for group prayer, which include prayers at BECs and at funerals, the general trend is that senior Catholics pray in Hakka and junior ones in Mandarin. For instance, at the memorial service for the deceased, which usually takes place during the daytime, senior Catholics pray the Rosary in Hakka and juniors pray in Mandarin.

In fact, many children are not able to read and recite the Bible in Hakka. They cannot even understand the prayer in Hakka. According to our observation at the church, less than ten people attended the prayer of the Rosary which was prior to the Sunday Mass and all of them are senior Catholics. The language for religious rituals has changed as well. Prior to 1963, the Mass was conducted in Latin and the homily was in Hakka. After the reformation of Catholic in 1963, Mandarin replaced Latin as the language for the Mass and Hakka was retained for homily. In recent years, Mandarin further spreads its usage at the church. It is now used as the medium for the Mass, Bible reading, homily and hymns. Mandarin is also the administrative language of the church and the language between the priest and the congregation. Therefore, Mandarin is spreading as a lingua franca in the religious domain.

### Conclusion

The data from the current study shows that the spread of Mandarin in the religious domain coincides with its spread in the home domain. Almost all the Hakka Catholic parents speak Mandarin with their children. During the interviews, they explained the reasons for not speaking Hakka with their children, which is for the sake of their education. As the medium of instruction in Chinese primary school is Mandarin, the parents feel it natural to use Mandarin with their children so that they may adapt to the school easily. As to the language



for religious practice, in their belief, as long as they can understand it, which language to be used is not an issue. Moreover, both parents and children hold positive attitudes towards Mandarin. In their perception, Mandarin is an important language in Malaysia as it is the mother tongue of the Chinese and a tool for communication across dialect groups.

To summarize, the spread of Mandarin in religious domain is manifested in its extensive usage for religious rituals and intergenerational difference in terms of usage of Mandarin. This finding conforms to the spread of Mandarin in the home domain and public settings in Johor (Wang 2012). Mandarin has spread as a mother tongue in the home domain and a lingua franca in the religious domain (Cooper 1976). As explained by the Parish priest, Fr. Martin Then C.C.D, the adoption of Mandarin for religious practices in Balik Pulau is to comply with the changing linguistic situation in the broader society.

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